

WRITE
TO BE
READ

Benton Rain Patterson

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

TO FEATURE WRITING

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Elements of Good Writing: The Parts of the Piece

EVERY EVENING George Barrett kisses his four sons goodnight, including the two oldest who are 17 and 19. It embarrasses the older boys to be kissed by their father, and he admits that it may seem “a little weird.” But, he says, “I think that the way I live I may never see them again, and I don’t want to be stretched out dying in a street some place wishing for one more chance to see my family and say goodbye. So every time I kiss them it’s like it’s the last time I’ll ever see them, and I’m kissing them goodbye forever.”

That is the first paragraph of an article James Mills wrote for *Life*. In it are all the storytelling devices: characterization, dialogue, description, and narrative. The reader is introduced to George Barrett and sees him do something that reveals his character or personality. The reader also hears him speak, again revealing something about him. The things about Barrett that are revealed to the reader constitute characterization; the reader starts to know George Barrett and begins to identify with him.

What Barrett says constitutes dialogue, even though he is the only one who speaks. The words that show Barrett in action, doing something—“Every evening George Barrett kisses his four sons goodnight”—constitute narrative. The reader also gets some description—words that, in that paragraph, let the reader *see* something: the two older sons are 17 and 19 years old. They’re older teen-agers, not grade-school kids, not middle-aged men with children of their own. The reader does not see George Barrett yet. His picture comes in Mills’s second paragraph:

Forever can come very suddenly to Detective George Barrett. He is a hunter of men. And none of those he hunts—thieves, drug pushers, Murphy men, assault and robbery men, killers—wants to confront him on anything resembling even terms. Because when George Barrett hunts for a man, he invariably finds him; and when he finds him, the man is not always ar-

rested, but he is always sorry he was found. George Barrett is a tough cop. His eyes, cold as gun metal, can be looked at but not into. His jaw is hard and square as a brick, and his thin lips are kept moist by nervous darting passes of his tongue. When he laughs, only his face and voice laugh. Inside, George Barrett does not laugh.

Now the reader sees him. The reader has discovered who George Barrett is and what kind of man he is. The reader is also identifying more with Barrett, beginning to place himself in Barrett’s shoes. All of that is happening because of the characterization, dialogue, and description supplied by the writer.

Everything Mills has written so far about Barrett can be classified into four categories, the same categories into which virtually all written language can be classified. Everything a writer wants to write can be constructed with those four components; nothing more is needed. They are the building blocks, and it’s immensely important for a writer to know them, their functions, and how to use them.

Using the Four Building Blocks

NARRATIVE. Narrative describes *action*; therefore all the words and sentences that *show* movement, show what is happening or did happen, can be labeled *narrative*. Narrative is what lets the reader see, in his mind, the action occurring—the same way movie film lets the viewer see action with his eyes. Every viewer knows how boring a talky or purely scenic movie can be; it’s the action that makes it interesting. The same is true for a feature or article. Narrative is the building block a writer uses to put action into what he writes.

Here’s a sample of narrative from a piece Ronald B. Taylor wrote for the *Los Angeles Times*:

Night darkened the cab as Kathy Manning downshifted the big, 18-wheeler and pulled off the freeway, queuing up behind other trucks at the Castaic, Calif., scales along Interstate 5.

She let the 72,500-pound semi-tractor and trailer roll slowly across the scales, got the green clearance light for the load of metal ceiling grids and gunned the powerful diesel.

Checking her mirrors for oncoming

traffic, she wheeled the rig onto the freeway. As she shifted up through the gears, Manning yelled over the engine’s roar: “If I ever meet a man I can love, I’ll settle down, quit drivin’ truck.”

She took a pinch of snuff, tucked it between her lower lip and gums and continued, “But this is something I can do. I’ve mastered it. I’m a truck driver and I like it.”

Except for the quotes, label that whole section narrative. It shows the action.

DESCRIPTION. In reality (as opposed to an account of reality, written after the action has occurred and passed into history) the human senses perceive sounds, sights, smells, feelings, and tastes. Language gives names to each of those perceptions (*screech, whisper, prairie, shoe, new-mown hay, putrid, smooth, icy, sour, salty*), and when the names of those perceptions are read by a reader who shares the writer's language, the reader's mind conjures up the appropriate perceptions. The names, or words, are symbols of little pieces of reality.

Description is what lets the reader see for himself, in effect, what an actual eyewitness saw. It lets the reader smell, feel, taste, and hear, through language, what his senses would have perceived had he been there. It will also be referred to in this book as *descriptive detail*.

The task of a writer is to permit the reader to experience—vicariously, through language—the reality that occurred, as if the reader had been there when the action was going on. The task is to make the reader feel, while he is reading, that the reality *is* occurring and that he is living in it. The reader is thus transported from his safe and distant seat to the spot where the action is occurring.

Here's a sample of description from an article by David Hellerstein that ran in *Esquire*:

It's a chilly December day; the Manhattan sky is dull, the pavement free of snow. I leave my hospital at midmorning, wearing a white coat, beeper on my belt. I cross the street and enter Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and hurry past the security guard—just another doctor late for a meeting.

Dr. Lewis Thomas's office is off a corridor of laboratories in a research building in the block-square medical complex. The secretary announces me. I wait, watching a pallid woman proof-read *Blood* journal galleys, sliding a metal rule down long pages. I shiver. From Thomas's office comes a high-

pitched boyish voice, laughing into the telephone, wild and crackling:

"... wouldn't it be better if they were married?"

Then Thomas appears.

Six feet tall, of solid build, wearing a conservative suit—at first glance Lewis Thomas is more the banker or corporate lawyer than the man of science. His graying hair is brushed up and to the right. He wears horn-rimmed glasses. His face, deeply lined, is lively yet fundamentally serious. He moves quickly, a little stiff in the shoulders as though trying not to jar a sensitive organ. Up close there's some gleam in his eyes.

That's description.

QUOTES. Quotes are the same as dialogue, except that they don't include thoughts (as in: *What a dumb thing to do!* she thought). Quotes is the word more commonly and comfortably used by newspaper editors and re-

porters. Quotes are used to recreate the words spoken during the reality that occurred. They are what was said, presented in quotation marks so the reader hears, in effect, the speaker himself say it. Quotes further allow the reader to be on the scene. They also allow voices other than the narrator's (the writer is the narrator when he or she is telling a story in third person). Quotes also contribute to characterization, allowing readers to feel as if they know the character.

"Realistic dialogue," according to Tom Wolfe, "involves the reader more completely than any other single device. It also establishes and defines character more quickly and effectively than any other single device." It's important to notice that Wolfe said *realistic* dialogue. What is quoted for the reader must sound, in the reader's mind, like the actual person talking, as in this scene from a first-person article by Elizabeth Kaye, which ran in *California* magazine:

He played the jukebox. He played Pac-Man. Usually he hardly drank at all, but now he drank too much. He started several conversations with the question, "What kind of music do you like?" He was having a wonderful time in these surroundings that reminded him of his past, and I had never felt so distanced from him. While he was playing pool, one of the girls approached him.

"Are you an actor?" she asked.

"I'm a writer," said Tony.

"What kind of writer?"

"Right now I'm writing a story about Jonathan Winters."

"Well," I said in the car going home, "I've had a wonderful time, but this wasn't it."

"You're hard to please," he said.

"I just don't like bars. To tell you the truth, I wish you wouldn't go to them."

"To tell *you* the truth, if you start telling me where I can go, I'll leave."

"You mean you'd choose bars over me?"

"I'd choose myself over you."

I didn't say anything for a moment. "You're pretty smart for a young guy," I said finally.

He put his arm around me. He said teasingly, "Now tell me what you don't like about bars."

"First of all, they're a waste of time."

"What else?"

"They're coeducational."

He laughed. "I knew it. What else?"

"They're so low class."

"I *am* low class," he said.

The words in the quote marks are true dialogue. They constitute conversation. Quotes may be dialogue—conversation that occurred and is recreated by the writer—or they may be isolated remarks by the speaker, remarks made to himself, to a reporter, to God, to no one in particular. Quotes are simply what was said.

Here's a sample from a feature on Haitian refugees Mike Winerip did for the *Miami Herald*:

Simon stood and took Calixte's hands toward the end of the visit. This was Simon's prayer: "Lord, you are the father to everyone on land. This is your

people, and I'm your people also. This boy, he didn't do nothing wrong. He didn't kill nobody. I don't see how you punish a boy in a situation like that. So

please, Father Lord, let him go out. I praise you again and again.”

When he was done, Simon opened his eyes and kissed Calixte on each

cheek.

“Thank you very much, brother-in-law,” said Calixte.

Here’s another example from Ronald Taylor’s piece on the woman truck driver:

Once when she thought about quitting, she applied for a clerk-typist job with the Los Angeles Police Department.

“I passed all the tests, went in there

and I watched those clerk-typists at work for a while, then I turned and walked out. That kind of work’s not for me,” she said.

Quotes differ from quotations. Quotations are eternal phrases prepared in advance of their being spoken (“Four score and seven years ago. . . .”; “Ask not what your country can do for you. . . .”; “. . . a day that will live in infamy. . . .”). Quotations are meant to be chiseled into marble. Quotes, however, are the way real people actually talk. They sound real; they *are* real. Quotes that don’t sound real or that seem stilted are called wooden quotes and should be avoided whenever possible.

EXPOSITION. Exposition is explanation. It is the writer speaking, not in words that *show* something to the reader, but in words that *tell* the reader about something. Here is an example from an article about hunting wild hogs, by Thomas McIntyre, which ran in *Sports Afield*:

In the Old World, of course, the wild boar was among the greatest animals of the chase. Records of boar hunts can be found in cave paintings 40,000 years old. The Assyrians, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans all left behind images in art of the hunt for the boar. In literature, the fifth-century B.C. Athenian essayist, Xenophon, in his hunting treatise *Cynegeticus*, recommended that the Greek boar hunter use a spear with a 15-inch blade “keen as a razor,” and with copper teeth projecting from the middle of the socket to stop the

boar from running up the length of the shaft when struck and held by the hunter. He also advised the use of “Indian, Cretan, Locrian and Laconian” hounds, “prepared to fight the beast.” The boar was to be driven from its lair and caught in a purse net. But if it escaped before being killed and attacked a hunter who was without benefit of a spear, that hunter was to hurl himself to the ground and grasp the underbrush to prevent the boar from getting its tusks underneath him and ripping his belly.

Another example, from *The New Yorker*:

Writers, artists, and intellectuals in Yugoslavia—probably to a greater extent than those in other Eastern European countries—must contend with be-

wildering, kaleidoscopic shifts in degrees of freedom and constraint. For the most part, they respond to attack with boldness or bravura, but when

subjected to concerted criticism they adopt an attitude of quiet withdrawal which can last weeks or even months. During such times, they are seen but

not heard, and they float about town like martyred or tormented spirits waiting to be liberated.

It is virtually impossible for writers to avoid using exposition, no matter what kind of piece they are writing. Some things simply must be explained to the reader: background, circumstances, procedures, reasons, and so forth. Exposition can help speed up the story (that is, tell it more quickly). A writer must constantly realize, however, that exposition, of all the elements of the piece, is the dullest and hardest to read—therefore it is the part most likely to repel the reader.

The tendency of too many writers, especially newspaper writers, is to tell all, explain all, with exposition. They don’t take time to recreate the action, the scene, the dialogue. They simply summarize for the reader and, in so doing, write as if they don’t care if the piece is read or not. It’s as if they don’t want to be bothered with repeating the detail for the reader. The reader is held at arm’s length while the writer selfishly enjoys the detail for himself.

The writer’s function is not to absorb detail for himself or herself, then merely explain and summarize it for the reader. The writer should loop his arm over the reader’s shoulders and say, “Hey, I’ve got something to show you”—then *show* the reader. Exposition does *not* show; it explains and tells. Therefore it should be used only when absolutely necessary. It should come in small doses when it is used, so that bits of exposition are quickly followed by bigger bits of the interesting parts of the piece: narrative, descriptive detail, and quotes. For example, in that article about wild hogs, author McIntyre immediately follows his exposition section with narrative:

Now darkness was almost upon us. Before the last of the shooting light on the hunt’s second day, Ellis, August and I had spend most of an hour sitting far up on one side of a canyon, silently watching two enormous boars stir in the thick black sage on the other. The pigs would show us only the tops of their black backs, or their rumps moving behind bush, so we never had a shot. Smaller pigs had come out into the open draw below us to begin the feeding that would carry them from evening through the night and to barely past dawn. But Ellis was set firmly on a trophy. When the big boars got into the sage so thick we could no

longer see any sign of them, we climbed out of the canyon and back up to the ridge to start our way in, leaving the boars for another time.

We were halfway down the ridge, with its oaks and pines, when we saw the herd of wild pigs out in the open field below us. They stood in the cold shadow the ridge cast in the sunset, nearly a dozen animals, all large adults. The largest stood alone at the rear of the herd, tall and lean-looking, his thick mane of bristles caping his neck and shoulders. We worked our way down the slope in silence to where Ellis could get a rest for his rifle.

What It Takes to Make a Story

In newspaper jargon any piece can be, and usually is, called a *story*. It might be a straight news story, feature story, sports story, wedding story, page-one story, breaking story, anything. Story is the general term applied to practically any piece of content. In this book, however, story means the account, the re-creation through words, of an event or incident or happening. It is a story in the same way that *Moby Dick*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *Gone With the Wind* are stories—except that our stories are factual, not fictional. They are tales, but true ones.

Every story, fiction or nonfiction, must have certain elements. Without them, it is either not a story at all, or it is a poor one. The necessary elements are: characters, action, and description.

CHARACTERS. A story must be about at least one character. Ordinarily characters are humans, but they don't have to be. They may be animals or even inanimate objects *if* the writer gives them human characteristics. (*Steve the Steam Shovel* and *The Little Engine That Could* are children's books that tell stories using inanimate objects as characters. Charlotte the spider of *Charlotte's Web*, Black Beauty, and the rabbits of *Watership Down* are some animals that have served as story characters.)

ACTION. Action is what the characters do, say, or think. Characters must *do* something, providing action for the reader to see and hear.

DESCRIPTION. Description lets the reader see not only the character but what the character looks like, what he's wearing, how old he is, what kind of car he drives, where he works, where he lives, the scene where the action occurred, the night, the rain, the cold—all the important details the reader's senses would have perceived had he been there while the action was occurring. It's possible to have a story without including description. But it's a more interesting story when description is in it.

There are other desirable but not essential elements that may be added to a story to make it more interesting, more significant, more memorable: plot (or story line), suspense, conflict, change (whereby one or more characters undergoes a change in understanding, attitude, condition, etc.), and climax. When they are a part of the reality, a feature writer should put them into a piece. If they are not part of the reality, there is no way they can be included. To do so would turn fact into fiction.

Using Stories

To take advantage of what we know about readers' interest in other

people and in the things William Randolph Hearst called “the fundamentals,” a feature writer deliberately puts people (characters) into what he writes. He describes them and shows them (description) doing and saying (action, expressed through narrative and quotes) whatever it is that makes the characters worth writing—and reading—about. When he puts those elements into his piece, a writer is ipso facto *featurizing* his subject, handling his material and writing his piece as a feature. He is also telling a story, which you now know is the best and most effective way to convey information. The writer thereby gives his piece and his publication the best possible chance of being read.

Sometimes a piece, instead of containing several little stories, will be one long story. The writer will spend the entire piece telling one story. That kind of piece is called *continuous narrative*. It can be the simplest sort of piece to report and write. When he gathers his information for it, the writer merely keeps asking, in effect, “And then what happened?” When writing the piece, he simply picks a good spot to start the action, interrupts it for background and explanation (one of the necessary exposition sections of the piece), then resumes the chronological account of what happened.

Usually, however, a piece will *not* be continuous narrative. The piece will cover some subject other than a single event or a narrow span of time—the two major types of subjects that lend themselves to continuous narrative. Instead of being continuous narrative, the usual piece will be built around two or more small stories that might run in length from a couple of paragraphs to a couple of pages of copy. Those little stories are called *anecdotes*. They are not necessarily funny, although they might be. They might also be grim, sad, poignant, hateful, or whatever else the reality which they recreate was.

Anecdotes are stories because they contain all the elements needed to make a story: characters, action, description. And sometimes more. In all of prose's forms, components, and styles, there is nothing more important to reader interest or delightful to the reader than anecdotes. They are to a piece of writing what flesh is to the human form.

The ability to handle anecdotal material—the story elements from which anecdotes are made—is so important that it can be considered the key to success for a nonfiction writer. Unless he learns to write with anecdotes, a writer will reach a stage of arrested growth and never develop beyond it.

Experienced writers have found at least four good uses for anecdotes, and every other writer should make those same discoveries. He should learn to use anecdotes:

To introduce the subject to the reader. Notice in the James Mills excerpt

at the beginning of this chapter how Mills shows the reader a scene, puts characters into it, shows the main character doing something, and lets him speak. The lead is a little story about George Barrett, whom the reader meets for the first time. (See Chapter 6 for more on anecdotal leads.)

To illustrate or make the point. It's not enough for a writer to make a general statement to the reader, even if it's attributed. A generalization (for example: "Harold Coogan often draws on his own brand of Irish wit") should always be supported with a specific, offered as evidence of the truth of the generalization. In the case of the Harold Coogan generalization, the writer should follow it with an anecdote (or a quote) showing Coogan being witty.

Here are two examples from a *McCall's* article by Susan Jacoby, showing how anecdotes support generalizations:

Bearing in mind the slow progression through the stages of grief, it is important to be willing to listen to the bereaved long after the initial loss. "I wasn't able to talk about my wife at all for the first few months after her death," says one man, "and then a flood of memories was released when I saw a dress in a department-store window that was exactly the kind she used to like. About nine months after she died, I began to want to talk about her and our married life—but my relatives thought this was morbid. I'll never forget spending a whole evening with one of my wife's friends, reminiscing about a wonderful vacation that we all had taken years ago. It wasn't morbid

at all—we were remembering her life instead of her death."

... When some bereaved people find that they are beginning to take pleasure in life again, they may deliberately sabotage their own prospects for happiness.

One woman, who had become seriously interested in a man three years after her husband's death, ruined the relationship by fleeing—with no explanation to the man—to the small town in Vermont where she had spent her honeymoon. When she returned a month later, the man had started seeing someone else. At that point, an understanding friend suggested that she might benefit from counseling.

The use of anecdotes to illustrate or make the point is a communication device as old as antiquity. Jesus used them to teach his followers. His anecdotes are called parables. They are just as effective today as they ever were. "The anecdote that makes the point," according to Hubert Lockett, longtime editor of *Popular Science* and later editorial vice president of Times-Mirror Magazines, "is the best way to communicate."

To condense a long story. A story that in reality occurred over many months or even years can be told within the restrictions of limited space by relating significant incidents, or episodes, told as anecdotes. Episodes about certain key characters in the ancestry of writer Alex Haley constituted the telling of the generations-long story of how one man came to be who he was and where he was. Haley's book, *Roots*, was first a magazine

serial, then a book, then a television serial. The same technique can be applied to much shorter pieces. Curtis Hartman, in his article in *Inc.* magazine, did something similar by showing episodes in the lives of John and Peter Van Arsdale and their troubled airline, Provincetown-Boston Airline. He used episodic anecdotes to help compress action that occurred over many months.

On paper, the rise of John Van Arsdale ended with a single flight. On November 29, 1983, according to the FAA, he had been flying a Martin 404 from Hyannis, Mass., to Naples when he lost all the hydraulic fluid just after takeoff. Rather than landing the plane at once, as required by the FAA, he had flown on to Jacksonville, Fla., where PBA has a maintenance base. In Jacksonville, he moved the passengers onto a Nihon YS-11, and flew down to Naples. Since he had never won an FAA rating on a YS-11, he was flying illegally. Then, when the trip was completed, he had forged another pilot's signature on the flight log. . . .

Peter had given a lot of thought to running a managers' meeting, even before he became CEO. He had always thought John was too critical, too much like their father. His meetings were hour after hour of finger pointing, with no agenda and no objective. So Peter sat quietly, drumming his fingers on his desk as his managers had their say one by one. Having the CEO's ear was a new experience for most of them, and they took it—at length. What should have been a half-hour meeting stretched on to two hours, because every decision was deferred to Peter. We need 200 copies of the manuals—what printer should we use? The pilots would be testing at the airport—what

motel should they stay in?

In time, Peter hoped, he would be able to avoid so much detail. But for now his managers needed all the support they could get. "I've got a lot of guys in there who are really trying to watch the dollars, and I've got guys in there who have never had to make decisions." He knew how they felt. . . .

John himself came to the office only once that week.

Time had stopped for John with decertification. He looked tan and relaxed, but the threat of a legal battle dragged on, and his 63-year-old mother worried about what he would do with himself. His plans were vague. Write a book? Move to France? Run for office? In the meantime, he had a house filled with long-deferred projects to keep him occupied, and lunches with his son at McDonald's. He had come by the office to pick up a few personal effects, and to see if he could borrow his brother's boat.

"Sure," Peter agreed. "I could only use it between midnight and six in the morning anyway."

Then he stood with John in his new office, looking at seat fabric for the new planes until his brother was ready to go.

"Anything I can do to help?" John asked.

"Nope," Peter said.

The same kind of condensation can be done in 1000 to 1200 words, a normal newspaper feature length.

To conclude the piece. In a feature, unlike a straight news story, the conclusion is almost as important as the lead. When a reporter writes an inverted-pyramid news story, he often doesn't know what the last paragraph will be when the story appears in print. In fact, that's one reason the writer writes it in inverted-pyramid style, so an editor or a production

person can whack it off at almost any point below the second paragraph.

The feature, however, should be a rounded story. The writer should plan it—plan how it will begin, where it will go from there, how it will end. If the writer does the job well, the reader will be drawn gradually, more deeply into the piece until finally the story has been told and the reader recognizes the end without having to be signalled by a 30-dash or some other graphic device. The piece should neither peter out nor stop abruptly. It should conclude with something that sums up or makes the final statement, or otherwise rounds off the piece. Such a conclusion is often provided by an appropriate anecdote.

James Mills used such an anecdote to conclude and round off his piece on Detective Barrett. After letting the reader see, hear, and feel the problems and frustrations of a big city cop's job, the main message of the piece, Mills offered a concluding anecdote to sum up both Barrett and the situation:

So Barrett thinks about America's less sophisticated areas "where people still know the difference between the cops and the robbers." He is in a motel talking to the security man when a report comes in that a guest has been burglarized. Barrett and the security man go to the room. Someone has entered the room while the guest, a Wyoming businessman, and his wife and little boy were out sight-seeing. The burglar took exactly \$2.17.

Barrett and the house detective leave the room and as they walk to the elevator the house man says dis-

gustedly, "What about that? A crummy \$2.17 and he wants to make a big federal case out of it."

"No, no, you're wrong," Barrett says. "He's from Wyoming and someone was in *his* room. That's what got him mad. And I subscribe to that completely. We're beginning to take this stuff for granted. 'Someone in my room? Oh, okay.' Like it was the standard thing. Well, it shouldn't be the standard thing. I'm with the man from Wyoming. He's one of the good guys—and there aren't too many of us left."

Using Quotes and Description Outside the Context of the Action

Quotes may be used to recreate conversation or other words spoken during the action the narrative describes, as when Barrett says, "He's one of the good guys—and there aren't too many of us left." Quotes may also be used outside the context of the action described, as when Barrett says in the first paragraph of the piece, "I think that the way I live I may never see them again, and I don't want to be stretched out dying in a street some place wishing for one more chance to see my family." Barrett makes those comments not as he kisses his four sons good night, but after the incident, outside the context of the action.

Quotes outside the context of the action allow comment, background, and explanation without having to resort to exposition. The explanation

comes from another's voice, not the writer's. Quotes outside the action also allow the characters to speak for themselves, just as quotes do when they are spoken within the context of the action. They also allow the reader to hear voices other than the narrator's.

Quotes outside the context of the action may also be used to support a generalization, in the same way an anecdote does. For example, the statement about Harold Coogan may be supported by an anecdote, by recreating an incident and including something Coogan said during the incident, or it may be supported by one or more quotes from Coogan, apart from the incident. The quotes would simply let him speak, and the reader would "hear" him, but there would be no scene or action.

A writer, however, must be careful about mixing quotes that occur outside the action with those that occur during the action. In most cases, outside-the-action quotes should not be inserted into an anecdote or continuous narrative where they may interrupt the scene and action being recreated. They can spoil the illusion of reality that a writer works hard to create.

Here's an example of how the illusion is lost through misuse of an outside-the-action quote:

Dr. Llew Ehrhart and two of his colleagues walked over the white, sandy dunes, finally arriving on the hard-packed and damp sand of the seashore. It was barely light; the sun hadn't yet broken the horizon.

A green mound down the beach caught Ehrhart's eye, and he started toward it. Reaching the object, Ehrhart froze. It was a green turtle.

"I remember thinking, *Not another!*" he said. "His back fin looked bitten to pieces, but he was still alive."

Ehrhart immediately ran back to his small pickup truck and carefully drove it over the dunes. He and his colleagues hoisted the turtle with nets into the bed of the truck, then sped off to try to save the turtle's life.

Notice how the quote that begins "I remember thinking . . .," breaks into the chronology. Ehrhart is speaking to the reporter in an outside-the-action quote, weeks after the incident. The writer should have written it this way:

A green mound down the beach caught Ehrhart's eye, and he started toward it. Reaching the object, Ehrhart froze. It was a green turtle.

Not another! he thought. Its back fin

looked as if it had been bitten to pieces, but the turtle was still alive. Ehrhart immediately ran back to his small pickup truck and . . .

Unless a writer is attempting some attainable special effect, or unless there is some other good and cogent reason for doing otherwise, quotes outside the action should be delivered to the reader only following the anecdote (or in some cases before it), never in it.

Description may also be used outside the action. James Mills did so in

his description of Detective Barrett (see page 15). The reader gets to see Barrett, but not in any particular scene. It's a still picture the reader sees of Barrett, not a movie.

Summary

Each of the four parts of a piece—narrative, description, quotes, and exposition—is necessary to help deliver the intended message. Furthermore, it is important to pace a piece so that the parts work together successfully. This lead from a feature by Bella Stumbo of the *Los Angeles Times* shows how it is possible to mix them into a readable whole:

Yvonne and Yvette were standing in front of a mirror in their bedroom, intently combing their hair. They constantly fiddle with their hair, which rarely seems to please them.

—*Narrative*

They were dressed in matching jeans and striped, scoop-neck T-shirts,

—*Description*

which they step into. They always dress identically because, said Yvonne,

—*Exposition*

“Otherwise we’d look awkward.”

—*Quote (outside the context of the action)*

“My hair’s too short,” grumped

—*Quote (within the context of the action)*

Yvette, who had been to the hair-

—*Exposition*

dresser the day before. “I went to some new place, and I shouldn’t have.”

—*Quote (within the context)*

The twins always speak in the singular, never the plural. It can be disconcerting at first.

—*Exposition*

“Mine’s too curly,” said Yvonne. “I think I’ll get it straightened some.”

—*Quote (within the context)*

They combed in silence for a time, two combs, four hands, four elbows busily churning in the air.

—*Narrative*

Asked finally how they determine whose hair is whose, Yvonne’s hands hardly skipped a lick.

—*Narrative*

“It’s simple. Here, I’ll show you,”

—*Quote (within the context)*

she said, still peering at herself in the mirror. With a practiced flick of the wrist, she drew an arbitrary part across the long, continuous crown that connects her to her sister.

—*Narrative*

“*That* hair,” she said solemnly, pointing to the far side of the line, “is *her* hair, and *this* hair,” she said, pointing to the near side of the line, “is my hair.”

—*Quote (within the context) and narrative*

Elements of Good Writing

Yvonne and Yvette Jones of Los Angeles are the only surviving adult Siamese twins who are still joined, medical records show.

—*Exposition*

As a feature writer you need to remember only a few simple rules to make what you write interesting to the reader: (1) Put specific people into the piece, (2) tell stories, and (3) let the reader see and hear for himself. Every feature or article must have ample amounts of the elements of good writing: anecdotes, quotes, and descriptive detail. Exposition is as dull as a sermon and should be used only when absolutely necessary.

The Justifier

EVERY PIECE needs a reason for being.

It needs a reason for a writer to write it, a reason for an editor to accept it and run it, a reason for a reader to read it.

The first reader who must see the reason is, of course, the editor who has the power to accept or reject the piece. There must be something about the subject of the piece that will make it worth reading about, that will satisfactorily answer the question, “So what?”

For many pieces, especially newspaper features, that something is called *newsworthiness*. Most newspaper editors and many magazine editors will insist a piece be newsworthy before they will accept it or schedule it for publication. The more newsworthy the subject, the more likely the piece is to be accepted and published.

The reader who sees the piece in the publication also should be given a reason to read it. He or she must somehow come to believe the piece is going to be worth the time and effort required to read it, and that belief should come early in the piece.

The part of the piece that suggests the reason to read it may be called a *justifier*. It justifies, or attempts to, the writer’s writing the piece, the editor’s publishing it, and the reader’s reading it. The justifier comes near the beginning of the piece, as close to the lead as possible, so the reader sees it as soon as possible.

For example, read again the lead to John Noble Wilford’s article on the Colorado River:

Martin Litton pulled at the oars, easing the dory into the current, and began to fulminate. We were still in sight of Lee’s Ferry, where we had put in shortly after noon, after the rain clouds moved off into Utah somewhere and the hot sun dried out our little fleet.

The water was cold, no more than 50 degrees, and clear. I dipped my Sierra cup and took a drink, more to get acquainted with the river than to quench any thirst. Litton already knew the river, with an intimacy only a boatman of many years can have and knew enough to be concerned by the water

marks he saw on the rocks high along the shore. The river was low, threateningly low. "It's that dam," fumed Litton, nodding upstream in the direction of Glen Canyon Dam, 15 miles away.

Like most environmentalists, particularly those who also make a living running the rapids through the Grand Canyon, Litton has never forgiven the Bureau of Reclamation for tampering with this wildest of the big rivers in North America, the Colorado. In no uncertain terms, he blames the dam for killing mesquite trees along the shore by leaving them high and dry. He blames the dam for the fact that wind-blown tamarisk seeds are not being

drowned, thus permitting these alien trees to take root in the canyon. If someone happened to burn the camp bacon, he probably would think of a reason to blame the dam for that, too. But unquestionably, the river was low when we set out on our 18-day trip, and it was because the dam was holding back most of the spring runoff, keeping it in reserve to turn the turbines to meet "peak loads" in the air-conditioned cities.

We drifted with the current at a leisurely rate of about three miles an hour—walking speed. Litton's boat kept the lead, followed by five other dories and a large inflatable supply raft.

Now, here come the justifier—the suggestion of a reason to keep on reading. It is the author's answer to the inevitable question that the reader forms in his mind and that the editor demands of the writer: "So what?"

We were a party of 33—seven boatmen, a cook, and 25 passengers. We were doing what several thousand people do each summer, casting away from

ordinary comfort and security, and seeking an elemental experience in the risks of white water and the grandeur of canyon depths.

In the justifier, the author attempted to attach significance to his subject, importance to the events the piece is to describe. The justifier suggests that the story is not about a singular, isolated incident without relevance or meaning to other humans. The experience that the piece will describe is something that thousands do every summer; in other words, a lot of people are affected by this thing. Besides that, the justifier suggests this experience has adventure and romance, even a touch of mystery—thus holding out to the reader three of the five "fundamentals" in which William Randolph Hearst said people are interested.

Here are some other examples of justifiers:

The lead.

by Fred Welk

Jim Petersen parked his silver Ford van just inside the gate of the Estes Stables, next to the wooden building that houses the office and the tack room filled with racks of saddles and harnesses.

As if arming himself for battle, he

stripped off his shirt, stepped into a pair of beige coveralls, turned this baseball cap backwards over a head of gray, thinning hair and strapped on a pair of worn, leather chaps.

"Which horse is first?" he asked, ready to begin his day's work.

The Justifier

The justifier.

Petersen is a farrier, a shoer of horses. His is the job that was left when technology blew out the blacksmith's fire.

Although his customers are spread from southern Oklahoma to south of

the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, Petersen, 52, frequently can be found shoeing at the Estes Stables, where each year hundreds of North Texas students are taught horseback riding in physical education courses.

Fred Welk's piece on the farrier was written for and published in the *North Texas Daily*, the campus newspaper of North Texas State University. Therefore it was important for him to establish relevance with North Texas students, which he did in the justifier. The justifier also performed the task of telling the reader what was going on in the lead and hinting at what was to come.

The lead.

by Jim Nesbitt *Orlando Sentinel*

LAKE ALFRED—It was early Tuesday morning on a soon-to-be busy road in citrus country. A police officer stepped out of the gray half-light and elbowed his way onto a battered bus filled with murmuring farm workers.

"Let me see a green card!" the thin cop shouted, blinding the workers with the glare of his flashlight. Light stabbed the face of one worker.

"You know what I'm talkin' about? Got an I-94 card? Green card?"

The worker shook his head. So did eight others. The officer termed them illegal aliens who shouldn't be in this country, who shouldn't be working in the groves. None of them had the green cards which give aliens the right to work, but nobody was arrested.

The officer's flashlight also disclosed several youngsters who appeared to be under 12. State law says

children can't be in the groves—working or otherwise—without their parents.

The justifier.

The scene underscored the mammoth problems facing farm labor law enforcement. The Florida State Employment Service, which enforces state labor laws, has only two officers covering Polk and Osceola counties, the state's largest citrus region with an estimated 2,000 crew chiefs and 20,000 farm laborers.

And the officer's actions during this pre-dawn roadblock, where the foggy dark was pierced by the eerie flash of the magnesium flares, typified how the job is handled—hit the violations you can do something about and let the others slide.

The lead.

by Ronald B. Taylor *Los Angeles Times*

Night darkened the cab as Kathy Manning downshifted the big 18-wheeler and pulled off the freeway, queuing up behind other trucks at the

Castaic, Calif., scales along Interstate 5.

She let the 72,500-pound semi-tractor and trailer roll slowly across the

scales, got the green clearance light for the load of metal ceiling grids and gunned the powerful diesel.

Checking her mirrors for oncoming traffic, she wheeled the rig onto the freeway. As she shifted up through the gears, Manning yelled over the engine's roar: "If I ever meet a man I can love, I'll settle down, quit drivin' truck."

She took a pinch of snuff, tucked it between her lower lip and gums and continued, "But this is something I can do. I've mastered it. I'm a truck driver and I like it."

Here, at the beginning of a long, looping trip that would carry her through four states in eight days, is where Manning is happiest. The anticipation of new places and the chance meetings with old friends filled her talk.

From British Columbia to the Great

The following is a justifier that follows a descriptive lead, from an article that ran in *Rolling Stone*.

The lead.

by Timothy White

The window shades are drawn against the late-summer sun, transforming the suite in Manhattan's genteel old Carlyle Hotel into a lonesome oasis of resignation not unlike the sitting room of a sanitarium. Is it perfectly quiet within—no, there is the faint wheeze of labored breathing. Hunched in a stuffed easy chair at one end of the long living room is a pillowy mound of a man dressed in crisply pressed cotton pajamas and a linen bathrobe, his small feet reposing in scuffed leather slippers, his thin hair neatly combed. He appears to be asleep, his round, pink head pitched forward, chin upon the barrel chest, plump arms laying against his thick waist. If not for his size and the silvery

Salt Lake, over-the-road drivers call her "Sweet Drifter" and describe her as that "pretty little thing" who stands just over 5 feet tall and doesn't weigh more than 105 pounds.

The justifier.

Manning, soon to be 30, is one of a small but growing number of women who drive trucks for a living.

However, most of these women drive local hauls or work as part of two-driver teams, typically a husband and wife, driving as owner-operators of long-haul trucks.

"It's very, very rare to see a woman driving alone over the road. It's hard, lonely work," said an officer of the California Highway Patrol at the Castaic scale.

Manning is one of the solo, long-haul drivers. . .

stubble that coats his jaws, he might be one of Maurice Sendak's man-faced infants, dreaming inside the frames of the illustrator's pleasantly baroque picture fables.

The justifier.

How does one awaken James Cagney, one of the finest and most versatile talents in the annals of cinema? Surely, at the age of eighty-two, with half a century of stardom (and twenty years of retirement) behind him, he desires and deserves his rest. But the consequences of living so long and rising so high in his profession have conspired against him.

The Justifier

Here are justifiers that follow situation leads.

The lead.

by Bill Curry

Los Angeles Times

DELTA JUNCTION, Alaska—Wolves took two of Gerald Brehmer's dogs. Bison forage in his crops. An inquisitive old black bear rattles around the Brehmer family trailer home, seven miles from the nearest telephone.

And now, after an initially promising growing season, Brehmer's amber waves of grain are white with a crusty bed of snow, the broken staffs of barley lost to the elements.

The justifier.

With 19 other families, Brehmer, 31, and his wife Cynthia, 30, are trying

The lead.

by Tad Bartimus

Associated Press

LA JUNTA, Colo.—On his honor, Buck Burshears has done his best to do his duty to God, his country and thousands of boys who've looked up to him for half a century.

The justifier.

James Francis (Buck) Burshears is the only leader Boy Scout Explorer Troop 2230 has ever had. He founded it in February 1933 with 27 members and one motto: "You don't have to wait to

to bring large-scale agriculture to a new land and to open a new frontier. "We're pioneering," declared 65-year-old John Emery, who is also among this tiny band of farmers. "It's all new here," he added, after a season in which most of his crop was lost to the weather. "That's the drawback to pioneering."

One hundred miles southeast of Fairbanks, on 59,700 acres of good soil once covered by black spruce and moss, these latter-day pioneers are participating in a bold new venture that brings together two of the predominant issues in Alaska: money and land.

be a man to be great. Be a great boy."

Burshears is a big man with a hearty voice, a fat cigar and a ready handshake. Now, at 72, the childless widower looks back on the years he dedicated to teaching other men's boys how to become men.

His devotion to "his kids" has brought him an honorary doctorate from the University of Colorado, along with scouting's highest honor, the "Silver Buffalo."

The justifier is an indispensable part of every feature and article. You should write the justifier so that it performs all three of its functions:

1. Tell the reader what's going on in the lead. Although a good lead suggests what the piece is about, the writer ordinarily must include something that will confirm what the lead suggests. Whether it's an anecdotal, descriptive, or situation lead, some explanation is usually needed so the reader knows for sure what the action, scene, or situation in the lead is all about. The explanation is exposition. It is the writer *telling* the reader. And it comes just under the lead.

2. Establish newsworthiness or relevance. The justifier points out the importance of the subject, giving the reader a good reason to keep reading.

3. Hint at what is to come. An effective justifier offers a promise of what the reader will discover by reading on, thereby drawing him deeper into the piece.